Poquoson family recalls visit to Australia

By Petey Husson

As summer moved into autumn here in Virginia, Australia was preparing for spring.

In early September, Lois and Phil Young and their daughter, Wendy, experienced this change during a visit to Brisbane and Sydney, two cities on the eastern coast of Australia.

The reason for the visit was an invitation issued to Young, a chemical engineer with the Materials Division at NASA Research Center. He was asked to present two scientific papers to the Symposium of Analytic Chemistry sponsored by the Royal Australian Chemistry Institute held at the University at Queensland.

Young, who has a doctorate in chemistry, specializes in the characterization of polymars, or plastics. (Characterization involves understanding chemical structure and how it responds to environmental effects.) His experience has been in research of these materials for use in military and commercial air and spacecraft.

The symposium drew more than 700 scientists, primarily from Australia, but including others from government research labs in many countries. Young spoke to an audience of over 250 scientists, giving a general lecture in the history and overview of the use of polymeric materials in the aerospace program.

His second lecture covered more specific scientific information The topic was centered on environmental chemistry and the effects on plastics, such as mylar, which can be used to lighten the weight of space shuttle payloads. Mylar is also the same material used in the small balloons you can buy in stores which never deflate.

Later in the week, Young took part in a seminar given to graduate students in polymar chemistry at Queensland University.

Aside from the business aspects of the trip, the family was able to enjoy a little of the Australian culture and scenery. That is, after they recovered from the trip itself.

They spent 32 hours traveling, leaving home on Thursday and arriving on Saturday, losing a day by crossing the International Dateline. (On the way home, they arrived before they started! Time is crazy when you cross the Line.)

Upon arrival, the Youngs were informed that there was a domestic airline strike and no flights were available. Trains and buses were sold out, but eventually they got a place on a bus that took them to Brisbane in time for the conference. And it only took fourteen and a half hours!

Needless to say, they had jet lag and spent a day or so not knowing whether to eat or sleep.

But all went well, and while Young was speaking to the scientific community, Lois and Wendy shopped a little and saw some sights. Also, Wendy was a diligent student and completed the homework they had requested from her Poquoson teachers.

The entire family was able to take a river cruise in Brisbane. They saw much of the wildlife so unusual to the eye of the North American, such as Tazmanian Devils, kangaroos, dingos, wombats and Koala bears.

In Australia, figuring money was a challenge. Pennies are the largest coins, and it took a while to decipher which coins were the correct ones. They found the shopkeepers to be very helpful and the people in general to be very generous, friendly and gracious.

The Youngs found a huge mall with seven floors, including amusement rides. Lois ventured into the old section of Brisbane where old houses had been converted to specialty shops.

The most pressing problems for Wendy occurred at the hotel. She plugged her curling iron into the wrong socket, and it began smoking because Australia's electrical current is different from ours. She also discovered that the number three on the side of the pool was not three feet, as in America, but three meters.

Other than a small scare for Lois when a Tazmanian Devil grabbed her by the leg, harmless but a little disconcerting, all else went smoothly.

Other family visits included a trip to a wool shed to watch the process of sheep shearing and the herding methods of sheep dogs. They also toured Sydney, including the famous opera house on the harbor.

They saw the house where Crocodile Dundee used to live, which was designed by the same person as the opera house.

Australian food was a little different. Hot dogs were more like what we call sausage, and the food was unusually spiced. The first meal Wendy requested upon her return to Poquoson was for a hot dog at the Crab Cake House.

The Youngs found the cities to be very modern, with Brisbane leaning toward more restoration of older buildings. There was more formality on occasions, such as the opening of the conference, which involved dignitaries and a fancy band, a reflection of the country's English influence.

Wendy noticed extremely bright colors in the clothing of young people, particularly the surfing clothes. She also learned that students all attend year-round school in Australia.

The television programs were much the same as ours, but with Australian hosts. Imagine an Australian Vanna!

Even the King's English sounded different. The words were familiar but had a different meaning: rice bubbles for Rice Krispies, car parks for garages, prongs for shrimp and take-away food for take out.

But the Australians don't assume you will know all their customs, so each hotel room has a video explaining customs, how to tip, all about taxis and places to be visited.

The family found that Australian people are very interested in American life and activities. Voyager was in the news while there were there, and many questions directed to Young involved that mission.

As the left for the airport to come home, they discovered how small the world really is. Chatting with the taxi driver, they found that he was the husband of the woman who was Young's contact person and who had arranged all their trip details.

Aside from the fiasco of the strike, they consider their visit to have been a memorable one. Wendy is seeking an Australian penpal and hopes to share her experience with some classes at the primary school.

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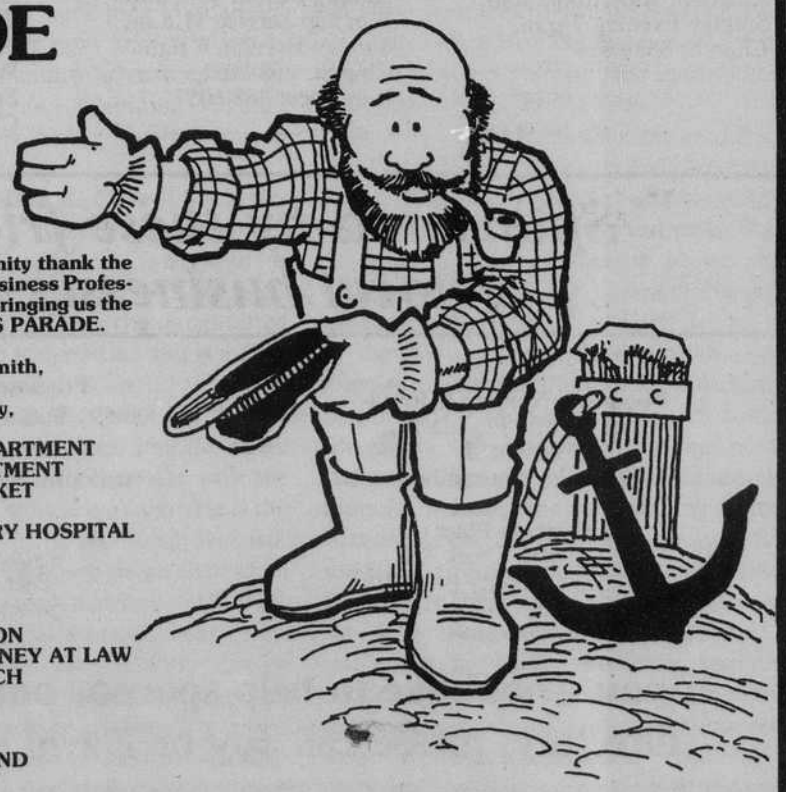

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